

Out, Damned Despot!

By Theodore Dalrymple

When I saw video clips of the joyful toppling of statues of Bashar al-Assad, as well as the tearing from walls of his ubiquitous portrait, I wondered what it must be like to be a dictator and see images of yourself everywhere (not that I have any ambitions myself in that direction).



Do you come to imagine, for example, that they are a manifestation of genuine popular affection for yourself, or are you like the Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza, of the poem by Ernesto Cardenal "Somoza Unveils a Statue of Somoza in the Somoza Stadium" (the fact that Cardenal, a Nicaraguan priest, was a commie doesn't mean that he wasn't a good poet).

The Somoza of the poem is perfectly clear-sighted. He knows that people didn't erect the statue spontaneously, out of love for him, because he knows that he himself ordered it to be

erected. Nor does he think that it will be a perpetual monument to himself because he knows also that the people will tear it down as soon as they can. No, he had it erected because he knew that the people would hate it, in other words that it would humiliate them, and a humiliated people is easy to cow into submission, at least until—to use a word of slightly different zoological connotation—the worm turns. (A note to pedants before they write in: I do not think that the verb *to cow* has any etymological link with the female herbivore known as the *cow*.)

It seems to me, however, that Cardenal may have simplified a little. Such is the complexity and potential dishonesty of the human mind that a dictator would be perfectly capable of imagining that a statue of himself is a manifestation of people's affection for him *and* that there are people plotting to bring down both the statue and him because they hate him. This is not totally irrational or impossible. After all, as Americans know, even in a free democracy some people love the leader and some people hate him (usually more of the latter after he has been in power for some time).

Assad *junior*, it seems to me, is a living refutation of Solzhenitsyn's famous remark that Macbeth was capable of killing only a handful of people because he was motivated by no ideology, and it requires an ideology to bring about hecatombs of the Nazis or Communists. Assad *junior* had a self-justification for his rule, no doubt, as every ruler and dictator has and must have, but he did not really possess a full-blown ideology in Solzhenitsyn's sense. His trajectory is worth recalling.

The son of a monstrous dictator, he seems at first to have had no inclinations in that direction himself. Among other things, he didn't seem to have the physical attributes of a dictator, but rather of someone pliant and weak, more herbivore than carnivore, more giraffe rather lion (though giraffes can kick a lion to death). And it spoke rather well of him that he

should qualify as a doctor, apparently quite genuinely so, and wish to become an ophthalmologist, to which end he studied in London, where his conduct was not that of a spoilt brat but by all accounts rather modest—laudably so, in the circumstances.

If it had not been for the stupid fatal road accident that killed his older brother, an accident emblematic of the follies of gilded youth everywhere, Assad *junior* might have spent his life anonymously and usefully as an ophthalmic surgeon—though, like all hypotheticals, this cannot be proved. He was like Macbeth, a man who would have been content to remain a loyal servant of the king before he met the witches who first unleashed ambition in his mind (where there must have been the potential for it). But of course, an honorable and decent future was not to be, neither for Macbeth nor for Assad *junior*.

Replacing his brother as legatee of a terrible father, Assad *junior* was at first of mildly reformist disposition, certainly not a born and bred bloodthirsty kleptocrat. He had been called back to “serve” his country and now found himself at the head of a criminal organization whether he liked it or not, though probably, given the considerable perks of the job, he came soon enough to like it. And then came the challenge to his power, in a country in which defeated politicians do not retire to tend their roses and write their memoirs. Honorable and honored retirement was not really a possibility for him; he could not hope to spend the rest of his life in Estoril as the overthrown monarch of a Ruritania might have been able to do. There would have been, in effect, no rest of his life, for he would have been safe nowhere.

Thus, he became a butcher, one of the worst; and as Macbeth found, once you start down the path of butchery, it is difficult, not to say impossible, to stop. You cannot, in mid-course, suddenly say that you now realize that it has all been a terrible mistake, that you are sorry and would like to start again, and that all you want is a second chance. You must kill

all your enemies before they kill you.

Again, the human mind being what it is, a manufactory of rationalization, Assad *junior* could no doubt justify his actions to himself, especially as he was protected, and protected himself, from direct contact with their consequences for millions of people. Besides, he lived in a part of the world in which there were no simon-pure competitors for power, and he could easily have convinced himself that the alternatives to his rule were even worse—which is a first step to the conclusion in his own mind that he was really rather a good chap. Not *après moi, le déluge*, but *après moi, le massacre*, he probably thought, disregarding the fact that massacres had long been taking place and were continuing under his rule.

No doubt he felt his departure as a personal humiliation, but as to the scenes of joy at his overthrow, he probably thought that they would soon enough change to those of anguish. As Britain's first prime minister, Sir Robert Walpole, said on the outbreak of the War of Jenkins' Ear (which was to cost a fortune and be of no benefit to Britain), "Those who are ringing the bells will soon be wringing their hands." Assad *junior* will not be wishing the Syrian people well, but rather all the misery in the world for having shown themselves so disgracefully ungrateful to him. It will serve them right!

Shakespeare would have understood.

First published in [Taki's Magazine](#)